

Monster Mash

4th Sunday of Epiphany

Sermon 1.28.18

Scripture: Mark 1:21-28

Last week's telling of the story of Noah and the Great Flood had me hearing it in a new way. This is the wonder of Godly Play. It invites a freshness of hearing that I'm always surprised by. We've been doing Godly Play in worship for ten years now, and I always ask myself, each month prior to our doing it again, has this run its course? I know some have never especially liked Godly Play Sunday; I know some like it best of all Sundays. Between those two poles, I wonder if it's run its course. But then we do it again, and it opens up a new hearing again, and I suppose that it's still making for good worship so we should keep at it, at least for one more month.

Last week's telling of the story of Noah and the Great Flood landed me there, as I was aware anew of God's change of mind (never to destroy the world again, from now on to leave aside the urge to wipe it all clean and start fresh) and I was newly aware of God's deigning to the imperfection of the world. Going forward from mythic time, emerging into historic time, God would now tolerate that so much of this good and beloved creation could go wrong, God would accept that so much *would* go wrong, and yet God would commit to staying amidst the creation that it might ever-recover its course.

No longer all about purity, God would be about redemption.

No longer all about absolutes, God would deign to ambiguity.

I mean, consider the rainbow. Even this most beautiful sight: it's a coming together of two apparently opposite weather phenomena, sun and rain. It's a visual delighting in the intermixing of distinctions.

I'd never noticed that before.

This is what can make the monstrous, of course. A monster, classically speaking, is an intermixing of what is otherwise to be distinct from one another. The monstrous is a hybrid or a composite. Frankenstein's monster is imagined as a sewn-together collection of parts. Medusa is conjured as a woman whose hair is snakes. One of the beasts fearsomely put forth in the so-called book of Revelation (the Revelation to John) is described as like a leopard with the feet of a bear and the mouth of a lion. Monstrous!

I'd be willing to bet this is one reason interracial marriage was once widely thought to be frightening and, more recently, transgender transitioning is often met with disdain. You know, it

might be why we're so squeamish about sex, "the beast with two backs," Shakespeare's Iago famously called it. Monstrous!

But remember this: Jesus Christ is therefore a monstrous notion, Jesus denoting the human man and Christ denoting the anointed one of God, confessed then to be fully human and fully divine. In this way, then, Jesus is a doubling-down of the covenant God revealed in the rainbow, a covenant in which God promises to deign Godself in God's absolute goodness, so to dwell amidst the creation where absolutes get confused—that is, if absolutes aren't denied altogether, such that everything is claimed to be relative, such that there is neither good nor bad but thinking makes it so.

Not for nothing, many heresies throughout the history of the church have pivoted on the question of whether Jesus Christ could really be both—Jesus *and* Christ. Tobias was just studying one for school, which I'd never heard of. Monophysitism of the 5th century had it that Jesus simply could *not* be both, could only be one—simply *must* be mono-physic.

Of it, Tobias asked me what's the big deal, why go to the effort of making it a heresy. I mean, what difference does it make?

I couldn't answer him then.

I can now.

To claim Jesus as mono-physical shrinks back from the radical, monstrous confession of the church—that God can maintain absolutes while also deigning to the realm of the relative. This heretical claim, then, would release the church from its dual charge that we hold fast to the fact of the good while not living by some myth-bound command of purity, which in practice becomes puritanical and even punishing.

To confess Christ as *dually*-natured, though, is to keep faith in the abiding reality of absolute good, by which we can evaluate the relative goodness of what we make of the world, while never operating as if any of us might ever absolutely harness this, embody this, or make manifest this absolute good. None of us will be good, and none of us will be impure to the degree that that one isn't also beloved. Instead, we'll an ambiguous mix of both, along with the whole of creation.

In short, to say Jesus is the Christ is to deny the cynical assertion that "everything's relative," and to say Christ is Jesus is to undermine the urge among all humanity to punish or purge any and everything deemed impure.

Mark's understanding of Jesus holds this paradox as central—that in Jesus there has come into time and history an eternal absolute. The one whose gospel narrative we'll follow through this year, Mark understands this world as having fallen to enemy hands, occupied as it were by an enemy force. Very much like Jerusalem and all Judea at Mark's time, which was suffering the occupation of Rome (a soldier on every street corner, a crucifixion outside every city gate), this whole world should be understood as just so occupied—that is until Jesus arrives on the scene. Here now, he who is absolute goodness, he who is absolute light, will put that occupation out.

Really, this is the effect Mark imagines Jesus to have had, as one who puts evil to flight. Each of the four gospel narratives has a distinctive Christology, and this is Mark's, that in Jesus' arrival we have now a presence whose immediate and real effect is as a match kindled in an otherwise dark room. The sudden light puts such darkness to flight.

You'll notice the lack of ambiguity here. Light is the undoing of darkness, the two unable to coexist. "This is not theoretically possible," a physicist named Jim wrote in an on-line answer to the question of coexistence, light and darkness. "This is not theoretically possible. The reason being is that darkness is not a 'thing' in the same way light is. [It is but a] lack of visible light." He went on to explain, "A place where there is absolutely no light is at the maximum level of dark. However, it does not work the other way around." In other words, on an elemental level, darkness ceases to be once light is introduced, is indeed powerless against the light. **There's just no negotiating** or intermixing with these absolutes—the absolute lack of something or is absolute presence.

So it is on a Christological level too, at least according to Mark, which we see in Mark's remembering that Sabbath day, in the synagogue in Capernaum. Immediately on entering it, Jesus taught, and as one with authority. Also immediately (for this is one of Mark's favorite words) a man with an impure spirit cried out, saying, "What is there between us and you, Jesus the Nazarene? Did you come to destroy us?" And isn't that just the way, an impure spirit assuming that Jesus would be all about destruction. That was likely *its* mode and aim—the impure spirit something whose perhaps *only* capacity is to destroy. Jesus, though, especially according to Mark, had no need to destroy anything. Since his mere presence meant the ushering in of the good, the kindling and sustaining of the light, the setting all evil and darkness to flight, destruction was as unnecessary, and maybe even uninteresting, a thing as could be.

I preached a few weeks ago that I appreciate this dynamic as something to imagine living out, something more worthy of imagining than understanding. "This image," I said: "wherever

Jesus shows up in this gospel, unholy spirits are put to flight. This illustration: wherever Jesus arrives in this gospel, darkness flees into shadow, unable to withstand being dark in the presence of such light. Whenever Jesus speaks, even just a word or two, the menacing and divisive noise of unrest and unpeace is quieted, cowed by the fullness and quickness of a holier spirit, indeed of the Holy Spirit.

“We’ll see Jesus drive out a lot of demons in this gospel narrative,” I said, “—so rather than falling into a preoccupation as to whether we actually believe in demons, let’s instead entertain the image of an arrival of goodness being itself enough to counteract a presence that is other than good. We’ll hear of Jesus quieting unclean spirits a lot in this gospel narrative—so let’s not insist on professing our sophisticated doubt that there’s any such thing as unclean spirits, and instead meditate on what it might feel like to engage with a redeeming Spirit in such a way as dispels what’s otherwise damaging.”

And I concluded by laying it all at your feet: “*You* be the one whose presence is a countervailing force to otherwise unrest, un-peace, un-truth. *You* be the one whose showing up is clarifying, saving, redeeming. Let that be you, and I’ll let it be me. And the world will fall silent for a moment of all its confused jangling, so full will it be of the clear sounding truth of the Holy Spirit.”

I said all of that, and I stand by all of that. But I should also tell you this: none of us is the absolute presence of the good as Jesus was, none of us is somehow the in-dwelling of an absolute that we’re wise to understand doesn’t find much of a home in this world. It may visit. It may grace even us—a moment of clarity, a moment of truth, that we can magically embody, that we can, by gracious force, bring to the world if but for this moment. But this realm that we occupy is one far messier than that, far more monstrous, for all the good and bad of that. And this is to say that our task is more complicated, not to mention confusing, than what I laid out to be our task a couple of weeks ago. Really, it’s both/and—be full of the pure light of the Spirit of Christ, and recognize the impossibility of such a task, for as soon as we sense ourselves as embodying that spirit we become potentially dangerous, as well. There’s nearly nothing as dangerous as a people who are sure of their own possession of truth—and if not dangerous, then at least insufferable.

Today is our Annual Meeting. After worship, we’ll review last year, which should inspire our thinking for this year, and might also get us wondering a bigger question, what we’re doing here at all. The only church in town, and with a participating congregation of but a small

number of people, we might be more prone to wonder that than we would have in the past, when church on Sunday morning was assumed, or that we would in places where church buildings are at every crossroads, so the question isn't why but which one.

We also might be prone to wonder about the good will we seem to enjoy from our neighbors.

A few years ago, word got out that we'd been talking about closing.

We didn't have plan for it, mind you, and it was hardly a preference. It was just a recognition of the reality that Monterey's population is going the way of the county around it, while that same county has *always* had more churches per capita than would ever have made any one of those churches meet building capacity. Plus, there's the fact of finances. We're okay for now, continuing on course thanks to an endowment of two now deceased members bequeathing to us of their estate. But we're spending that down, and someday it might be gone, as will active members who do things like call the oil company when the whole building has frozen, is a like a stone. Meanwhile, we'll do what we do, and we'll do it joyfully and well. But we might someday die, and that would be, if sad, also fine. Christian tradition has, in the past, done interesting things with death. We're wise to remember that.

But word got out and a few people freaked. I had two people in town make appointments with me. They'd developed plans for revival and wanted to fill me in. Both Jewish, neither was going to join our membership. But they did *not* want to see us go away.

I didn't seriously consider either plan, both way outside our wheelhouse, though one did offer me the chance to drive his Porsche, so it was hardly a waste of time. (I didn't take him up on that. "You don't want me to do that. Have you seen how I drive my Prius? It could get dangerous." Of course, that was before we had a Tesla. Now I'd like to drag race. But I digress.)

The point is, our neighbors largely seem to want us here—and not just our building, though there is that. They seem to want an active congregation here, and I think that's interesting.

I can only speculate as to why because I've never asked, since I think it'd lead to a conversation that would be not only awkward but unenlightening. I doubt even *they* understand why they want us here, which would make articulating it impossible.

As to my speculations, I think people like the idea that there are people out there in this ambiguous, postmodern monster of a world who still believe in the polar notions of good and

evil. These which orient us, these by which we can set our compass regarding the questions of how best to live, how even to imagine what “best” living might resemble; these which give us an aim to work toward, a vision whose realization we’re to aspire to: the poles of absolutes situate us for the critical work of enacting a common good in this compelling realm of the relative.

These days that seems more crucial than even in the recent past. With norms violated, with values turned upside down and inside out, it’s essential that we name these norms that we so long assumed, that we reinvigorate these values that once passed as “common sense.” And we can only do that, it seems to me, by appealing to the absolute good that *is* God, that is the testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that is invoked in congregations like ours week in and week out—invoked, and entertained, and played with, and played amidst.

A subway advertising campaign sponsored by an atheist group claimed we can be “good without God,” which I think is true at least as regards any one particular “believer” or “non-believer.” I don’t think you need an active relationship with a transcendent, intelligent, mindful God in order to be a good person. But I *do* think there needs to be an active understanding of what good is in order for us as a collective to “be good,” or rather to aim for what is good—and I *don’t* think any of us can have an understanding of what is good without engaging in the realm of absolutes. And then we’re in the realm of God—which is tricky territory for anyone who isn’t God, and we are none of us God. But we are endowed with imaginations for visiting this territory from time to time. We are, as the psalmist claimed, “a little lower than God, and crowned...with glory and honor.” We’re also charged with the high-stakes task of trying to figure out how to live together, a charge impossible without some appeal to a higher authority, and that will either be the biggest bully who manages to win the day or it will be something other than that. Really, that will either be an authoritarian or an authority.

I choose the authority. Further, I choose the one whose authority has been bequeathed to us through the wisdom of the ages and yet continues to reveal itself as fresh, resilient, true, and life-giving. I choose the God we meet in Christ, whom we’re also to meet in church, in worship with one another.

As it happens, it seems many of our neighbors have chosen that as well, if tacitly so and if with the request that we make that weekly journey back up the mountain instead of them. And I’ll admit, I’ve resented their tacit request from time to time. But lately I’ve been happy to do it—

to do this thing that I look around and find ever more crucial. I only get one life, after all, as far as I know, and I want to be sure to spend it worthily.

This, what we're doing here: this is worthily. And this morning, we have the chance to recommit ourselves to doing it once again.

But if not us, then who?

Thanks be to God.